

## PE1396/P

Response by petitioner Mr Ian Robb to answers to the above petition given by Dr Beverley Williams of the Rural and Environment Directorate, Animal Health and Welfare Division. These answers to the Scottish Government are regarding the overbreeding and abandonment of Staffordshire Bull Terriers in Scotland and the response here is designed to carry our petition forward.

### INTRODUCTION OF A SCHEME IN SCOTLAND TO PROVIDE FREE OR REDUCED COST NEUTERING OF DOGS.

We are pleased to note that despite a lack of information regarding the scheme in Clackmannanshire and current of lack funding for such a project nationally, Dr Williams does not entirely dismiss this idea, which we believe is a very good one. I am already in talks with Angus Council as to how people on low incomes can be helped to have their pets neutered. This is a local level discussion prompted by the very high numbers of “staffies” abandoned in the county and it is hoped that it will prove useful to find a way forward. Departments within Angus Council are already working together to help the situation, not only with low income families but also with irresponsible owners. All other councils should be encouraged with regard to this kind of scheme, for charities and vets will do all they can to help.

We are very pleased, therefore, to note that Dr Williams is keen to participate in discussions with local authorities, for an initiative on these lines from the Scottish Government to councils throughout Scotland could prove fruitful. Such an initiative would hopefully instil some enthusiasm for schemes at local level which would at least start the ball rolling with regard to bringing down dog numbers, in particular the numbers of unwanted “staffies.”

As to the point Dr Williams makes regarding our suggestion to finance such a scheme by doubling the penalty for dog fouling, we understand the concept of justice in the relationship between the offence committed and the appropriate fine. We feel, however, that our suggestion ought not to be dropped out of hand. Perhaps the Scottish justice system could be persuaded to take the lead in a situation such as this! It would be an innovative way to combine justice for an offence with benefit to the community, in this case animals who need and deserve our protection.

There now follows our response to:

#### A review of current legislation to clarify to the bodies involved the details and aims of the legislation.

A fair point indeed. However, the case does remain for some form of review, as the various bodies involved locally in the protection of animals are often confused as to their role with regard to the legislation – there is no doubt about this. If a legislature such as the Scottish Parliament produces legislation on animal welfare, surely it is up to that legislature to make sure the new laws are working in the way intended. If that does not appear to be the case, then there ought to be a case for a review on the current situation. It is not enough to state that it is up to Scottish courts to decide on the exact

interpretation of the law and to create precedents on which other judgements may rely, for very few cases related to the mistreatment of cats and dogs ever get as far as a court. Animals welfare appears to be given low priority within the fiscal service, unless the SSPCA is directly involved in the case. There are few chances, therefore, for the various other bodies involved to learn from the court system.

Aggressive and wholehearted enforcement of the current legislation in those sections of society who have little or no regard for animal welfare legislation.

Again, it was the Scottish Government who drew up this legislation to protect animals and consequently it is the responsibility of this body to make sure that it is being enforced properly. We are all subject to the law and in order to target that section of society which is ignoring it council resources should be appropriately targeted. There are no easy options – laws are made to be enforced and this should be made clear to council officials who are oblivious to the fact.

Councils may wish to consider new tenancy agreements which prohibit the indiscriminate and irresponsible breeding of dogs in their properties.

We cannot see how such a move on the part of local authorities can possibly disadvantage responsible dog owners. There is a world of difference between a pensioner whose life is enhanced by the company of a small dog and the family who regularly breeds litters of “staffie” crosses for financial gain. We would be delighted if the Scottish Government would, as Dr Williams suggests, become involved in discussions on council house tenancy agreements. We believe that the breeding of unwanted dogs on council estates is a huge part of the problem. It would appear that Housing Associations are able to handle the question of pets in their properties quite successfully. One example is that of Hillcrest, who have strict rules on the number of dogs in their properties and it is hard to see what councils cannot impose the same restrictions. Why can the same procedures not apply to council properties? We feel that priority ought to be given to this aspect of the “staffie” problem as there is no question that it holds the key to alleviating this tragic animal welfare blight on our communities. The lead here should come from the government and it should be a strong one.

A greater degree of liaison and cooperation between police, councils, council housing departments, the fiscal service and social workers, dog wardens and animal rescue charities

Clearly, such improved liaison would consider more efficiently all issues relating to dog welfare, overbreeding and abandonment. All the departments and bodies here are interlinked in this respect and could more easily identify the issues and how to deal with them if they talked to one another – particularly the various departments within the local authorities.

The setting up of a working party at government level to facilitate (4) and the establishment of working parties at local and council levels to help fulfil the same objectives, both to include animal rescue charities.

We feel that the situation merits close cooperation between government and local authority simply because it will get worse if ignored. There are more and more instances of cross breeding between animals to produce dogs with higher aggressive tendencies and this is happening primarily in council housing. Of course clarity of purpose is required for the setting up of such groups, but this can only evolve when appropriate groups are established.

An ongoing training programme for social workers which could be provided by animal rescue centres to give guidance on how to persuade clients to access microchipping and/or neutering of their animals. The ideal would be to legislate in favour of all Scotland's dogs.

We welcome Dr Williams' suggestion of a more collaborative approach with input from both animal welfare charities and social workers inputting into a joint strategy via the suggested working groups. We are also very pleased to see that the Scottish Government intends to take part in future discussions with microchip companies with a view to consideration as to whether it might be possible to achieve a national database. All dog charities, including the large ones like Dogs Trust and the SSPCA have been pleading for this for years. I am sure the Scottish Government would be given every possible help and encouragement by animal charities in Scotland to achieve this aim. The establishment of such a database would be a giant step towards the creation of a compassionate and well organised animal welfare programme in Scotland.